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# **Embodying Text: Reassessing Characterization and Performance in the Medieval English Herod Plays**

Carolyn Coulson

One of the best known villains in medieval English drama is Herod the Great, usually remembered for his ranting, epitomized by the often-cited stage directions in the Coventry Shearmen and Tailors' play, "*Here Erode rages in þe pagond and in the strete also*" and "*There Erode ragis ageyne*."<sup>1</sup> Students of medieval drama frequently cite these stage directions as if they were encountered in all of the English plays which feature Herod, betraying an assumption that there is an ubiquitous characterization of Herod the Great found raging on the pageants and streets of every town that staged a biblical drama cycle.<sup>2</sup> However, just as the out-dated

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<sup>1</sup> Pamela King and Clifford Davidson, eds., *The Coventry Corpus Christi Plays*, Early Drama, Art, and Music Monograph Ser. 27 (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000), 105–06. Citations to the Coventry plays are to this edition in this study. Citations to other dramas under consideration are to Stephen Spector, ed., *The N-Town Play*, 2 vols., EETS s.s. 11–12 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); Richard Beadle, ed., *The York Plays*, 2nd ed., EETS s.s. 23–24 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012–13); R. M. Lumiansky and David Mills, eds., *The Chester Mystery Cycle*, 2 vols., EETS s.s. 3, 9 (London: Oxford University Press, 1974, 1986); and Martin Stevens and A. C. Cawley, eds., *The Towneley Plays*, 2 vols., EETS, s.s. 13–14 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). Not included in the present study is the non-cycle *Killing of the Children* in Oxford, Bodleian Library MS. Digby 133.

<sup>2</sup> Previous studies have portrayed Herod as a medieval feudal tyrant (Robert Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theatre: Studies in the Social Dimension of Dramatic Form and Function*, ed. Robert Schwartz [Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978]); or as a mad sinner (Penelope Doob, *Nebuchadnezzar's Children: Conventions of Madness in Middle English Literature* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974]). David Staines has argued that there were two medieval dramatic characterizations of Herod, one comic and one approaching tragic, which look forward to characterizations on the early modern stage in England ("To Out-Herod Herod: The Development of a Dramatic Character," in *Drama in the Middle Ages*, ed. Clifford Davidson, C. J. Gianakaris, and John Stroupe [New York: AMS Press, 1982], 207–31).

tendency to see the different extant “cycles” as interchangeable has been supplanted by studies which focus on the particular concerns, theology, and aesthetics of those collections, a fresh reading of the Herod plays yields a new appreciation of the different characterizations of Herod and the skill of the playwrights who created them.

Certainly in all texts, Herod is a spiritual antagonist, consistently representing the corrupt world into which the pure baby Jesus is born. With a rich narrative tradition, beginning with the Jewish historian Josephus, that reiterates Herod’s gruesome, maggot-ridden illness and death, the character provides a locus for the dramatists to explore the relationship between a corrupt soul, a diseased body, and inarticulate language. While the N-Town and Chester playwrights elect to use the tradition of Herod’s death to demonstrate divine justice, the York, Towneley, and Coventry dramatists choose to reveal Herod’s moral failings through his language. The playwrights’ different methods of revealing Herod’s fallen spiritual state reflect larger interests of particular dramatists or play cycles. In the N-Town and Chester Death of Herod plays, a mediating character instructs the audience to see Herod’s end as typical of the punishment that sinners face. The staging of Herod’s death tends to universalize the character, as he represents the sinful human beings of the audience who will face divine judgment. In contrast, the Herods of the York and Towneley plays belong to a larger group of biblical villains whose ultimate powerlessness is dramatized by their foolishness, braggadocio, and rage. The linguistic sins of these Herods individualize them more completely than does the physical demise of their counterparts in N-Town and Chester.

Crucial to my study, then, is a resistance to the traditional assimilation of speech and gesture (or body). Anyone who has ever acted in or staged a play understands that a character’s dialogue may not be accompanied by physical action which communicates the same emotion or

idea. This potential bifurcation of speech and action has been glossed over by many scholars in their studies of Herod.<sup>3</sup> Of course, both body and speech work together in dramatizing the character, but to assume that they both do so in the same way ignores the practicalities of staging and acting. Often a character says one thing while doing another, and the very juxtaposition of the differences is crucial to understanding the character and the dramatic moment. This duality is often difficult to glean from the script alone. Fortunately, in the past thirty years, the various textual, historical, and interdisciplinary approaches to medieval drama have all benefitted from what may be the most exciting development in the discipline. The growing number of staged productions has yielded a wider acknowledgment of the scholarly value of performing these plays in order to explore the conventions of medieval staging.<sup>4</sup>

By trying to understand the playwrights' choices from within the framework of medieval thought about the relationship between the body, speech, and the soul, we can begin to understand the process of creating a dramatic character whose language and physical gestures revealed to the audience the state of his soul. In both the theology and the medical writings of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the mind, soul, and body were integrated. As Caroline Walker Bynum observes, "theorists in the high Middle Ages did not see body primarily as the enemy of the soul, the container of soul, or the servant of soul; rather they saw the person as a

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<sup>3</sup> For a notable exception to this tendency to conflate speech and gesture, see Hans Jürgen-Diller's discussion of liturgical drama's Herods in *The Middle English Mystery Play: A Study in Dramatic Speech and Form*, trans. Frances Wessels (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 42.

<sup>4</sup> Alexandra F. Johnston, "A Brief History," University of Toronto *Poculi Ludique Societas*, <http://groups.chass.utoronto.ca/plspls/about/a-history-of-the-pls/>, accessed 10 Mar. 2014.

psychosomatic unity, as body and soul together.”<sup>5</sup> The *Chirurgie* of Henri de Mondeville, an early fourteenth-century treatise written by the surgeon to King Philip the Fair of France (d. 1314), stresses “the power of the soul over the body.”<sup>6</sup> He invokes Constantinus Africanus for proof “that the virtue of the soul [*virtus animae*] modifies the complexion of the body, since the soul gives its being to the body and is present in all its parts.”<sup>7</sup> This idea is crucial to understanding Herod the Great’s traditional disease and, ultimately, the medieval dramatists’ creation of character: the outward body reveals the inner spiritual state.

The relationship between body and soul is further complicated by the role the voice plays as an additional outward expression of self. One’s voice is produced physically, and is therefore inherently a manifestation of one’s body. Peter Brown paraphrases Clement of Alexandria’s view of the interrelationship between body, soul, and voice: “The perfect tuning of body and soul must be reflected in the most delicate instrument of all—in the voice. . . . Clement shrank from the coarse explosion of the laugh. Its sudden, instinctive release seemed like a deliberate attempt to sabotage the measured flow of conscious human words, that echoed, in controlled, intelligible sounds, the still, abiding order of the divine Word, of Christ, within the soul.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 222, and *The Resurrection of the Body* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 159–66.

<sup>6</sup> Marie-Christine Pouchelle, *The Body and Surgery in the Middle Ages*, trans. Rosemary Morris (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 117.

<sup>7</sup> Henri de Mondeville, *Chirurgie*, as quoted by Pouchelle, *The Body and Surgery*, 148.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 126–27.

A voice that is not “measured” and “controlled” is an outward expression of a soul in a state of spiritual disharmony and hence of spiritual peril.

Like Clement before him, St. Augustine makes clear that the soul and rationality are divine gifts: “this one omnipotent God is the creator and maker of every soul and of every body. All who find their joy in truth and not in mere shadows derive their happiness from Him. He made man a rational animal, composed of soul and body.”<sup>9</sup> As both Clement and Augustine explain, in failing to subordinate emotions to reason, man becomes irrational and forgoes the special link humans have to the divine. As a man forgoes reason and becomes more bestial, he falls farther from his divine Maker. Medieval vernacular dramatists put this idea to good use by manipulating the language of characters to reveal their moral strengths and weaknesses.

Josephus’s description of Herod’s disease and death in *The Jewish War* (c.75 C.E.) and *Jewish Antiquities* (c.93 C.E.) initiated a long tradition. Descriptions of Herod’s death generally include fever, extensive itching, constant pain, swollen feet, shortness of breath, and worms in and gangrene of the genitalia. Along with being represented in the visual arts, as in the roof bosses in the transepts of Norwich Cathedral, Herod’s disintegrating body is described in many Christian texts from patristic homilies to later Latin and vernacular literature, including the *Golden Legend* (*Legenda Aurea*, c.1260) and the *Cursor Mundi* (c.1300).<sup>10</sup> While the Christian

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<sup>9</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *City of God*, trans. Gerald G. Walsh et al., ed. Vernon J. Bourke (Garden City, NY: Doubleday/Image, 1958), 111 (5:11).

<sup>10</sup> These early sixteenth-century Norwich Cathedral bosses are discussed in M. D. Anderson, *Drama and Imagery in English Medieval Churches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 97, figs. 11d–11f. See also the image of a “broken” Herod at the foot of a baptismal font at South Anston, Yorkshire, in Barbara Palmer, *The Early Art of the West Riding of Yorkshire*, Early Drama, Art, and Music Reference Ser. 6 (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1990), 90, fig 23.

texts retain Josephus' description of Herod's symptoms, they change the cause of his illness. Josephus characterizes Herod as a decent ruler who had bad luck in his family life, not as a wicked tyrant.<sup>11</sup> The lack of condemnation in his tone is consistent throughout his account. Herod's troubles, particularly his illness, are not portrayed as punishment.

Josephus's text does not include the Slaughter of the Innocents, which is known to Christianity from its sole canonical appearance in St. Matthew's gospel (2:16). The usual Christian interpretation of Herod's disease as a deserved and righteous divine punishment for the killing of the Innocents is seen as early as the fourth or fifth century in the apocryphal *History of Joseph the Carpenter*, which claims Herod suffered the worst form of death in retribution for slaughtering the infants.<sup>12</sup> In his *Historia Ecclesiastica*, Eusebius emphasizes that "the price paid by Herod for his crime against Christ and the other babies" was instantaneous retribution, "without the shortest delay," for "divine justice overtook him while still alive, giving him a foretaste of what awaited him in the next world."<sup>13</sup> Eusebius therefore alters the cause of Herod's punishment while embracing the physical details of it, establishing the interpretation that all later Christian writers would follow. In texts such as the *Golden Legend*,

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<sup>11</sup> Josephus, *The Jewish War*, ed. and trans. John Thackeray, 2 vols., Loeb Classical Library (reprint, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1961), 1:317 (1:38:8).

<sup>12</sup> *The History of Joseph the Carpenter* (New Advent Church Fathers), chap. 9; <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0805.htm>; accessed 10 Mar 2014.

<sup>13</sup> Eusebius, *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*, trans. G. A. Williamson (New York: New York University Press, 1966), 57.

the *Polychronicon*, the *Cursor Mundi*, and *A Stanzaic Life of Christ*, the rotting of Herod's body is both a punishment for and a reflection of his wicked deeds and corrupt nature.<sup>14</sup>

In both pre-Christian medicine and the Christian medicine that appropriated the classical medical theories, disease is linked to the behavior of the patient. The belief that certain illnesses were caused by specific behaviors developed from Greco-Roman medical authorities and was influenced and modified in the Christian Middle Ages. Galenic medicine advocated moderation (*sophrosyne*), without which the four humors would become imbalanced and lead to illness. In post-Galenic medicine, excessive behavior, therefore, is the root of most disease, making "health . . . a responsibility and disease a matter for possible moral reflection."<sup>15</sup> Medieval medical belief was largely shaped by the confluence of two systems of understanding illness, the classical belief in the four humors and the Christian belief that illness came from God.<sup>16</sup> For Christians, one's physical well-being was based on one's spiritual well-being, and the Galenic system of humors was integrated into the relationship between body and soul.

Performance by its very nature is concerned with bodies: bodies in conflict, bodies as symbols, bodies juxtaposed in space, bodies in danger, and bodies in "death." Rarely, in fact,

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<sup>14</sup> See Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, trans. William Granger Ryan, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 1:58–59; Frances A. Foster, ed., *A Stanzaic Life of Christ*, EETS o.s. 166 (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), 118–20; Ranulph Higden, *The English Polychronicon: A Text of John Trevisa's Translation of Higden's Polychronicon, based on Huntington MS. 28561*, ed. Richard Arthur Seeger (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 1974), 390–91; Richard Morris, ed., *Cursor Mundi*, 7 vols., EETS o.s. 57, 59, 62, 66, 68, 99, 101 (London: Oxford University Press, 1874–93), 2:676–83.

<sup>15</sup> Oswei Temkin, *Galenism: Rise and Decline of a Medical Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), 40.

<sup>16</sup> Carol Rawcliffe, *Medicine and Society in Later Medieval England* (Frome: Alan Sutton, 1995), 7–8.



does drama present a body at rest. Medieval drama is no exception. The very framework of the cycle plays is the beginning and end of mankind's body, from the Creation to the Last Judgment, when bodies and souls will be reunited. The decay of Herod's once-virile body symbolizes the fate of Christ's antagonists. However, his decaying body moves beyond this general symbolism and, in the Chester and N-Town plays, provides a moment of moral reflection for the audience.

*N-Town*. Since we now understand that the plays in the N-Town manuscript can no longer be understood to be a true "cycle," it is difficult to discuss pervasive themes or echoes across the different pageants. However, scholars such as Gail McMurray Gibson and Theresa Coletti have clearly demonstrated a pervasive sensibility in the N-Town plays, one which emphasizes the Virgin Mary and the material qualities of Christ's Incarnation.<sup>17</sup> Certainly, many plays in the collection relate their story and message physically, through the bodies, pure or polluted, of their characters. This emphasis on the corporeal drives the dramatization of the Herod episode in which, throughout the sequence, physicality is emphasized, especially when Mors asks the audience members to think about their own bodies. Implied in N-Town's dramatization of death is the final demise, the nature of the body at the Last Judgment. By asking the audience to consider their own bodies' future at Judgment Day, the play demands that they see themselves as guilty humans, not altogether qualitatively dissimilar from Herod himself.

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<sup>17</sup> Gail McMurray Gibson, *The Theatre of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Theresa Coletti, "Purity and Danger: The Paradox of Mary's Body and the Engendering of the Infancy Narratives in the English Mystery Cycles," in *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature*, ed. Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 65–95.

In the N-Town Death of Herod play, after being told that the Magi will not be returning, Herod launches into a violent rant of particularly bloody imagery aimed at the bodies of the children of Israel. He even indicates that he will be wielding the murder weapon himself: “Rybbys ful reed with rape xal I rende! / Popetys and pap-hawkys I xal puttyn in peyne, / With my spere prevyn, pychyn, and to-pende!” (20.10–12). His focus is not on the threat Christ poses to his reign but on the bloody images of the torn bodies of the infants. When the soldiers report back to Herod that they have completed the massacre, they emphasize the physical destruction they have wrought: “Barnis ben blad / And lyne in dych! / Flesch and veyn / Han tholyd peyn” (115–18). The mutilated bodies of the Innocents are highlighted, just as Herod’s rotten body (and the bodies of the audience) will be the focus of Mors’s final speech.

After the killing, Herod rejoices and remarks on his happiness at a festive, luxurious dinner, complete with minstrels, but then Mors appears as God’s messenger to take him away in punishment for his overweening pride and wicked deeds: “Ow! I herde a page make preysyng of pride! / All prynces he passyth, he wenyth, of powsté. / He wenyth to be þe wurthyest of all þis werde wyde / Kynge ovyr all kyngys þat page wenyth to be!” (168–71). Mors assures the audience that God’s Son has survived the slaughter, and also, most significantly, reports that he has been sent by God to punish Herod with a fatal sickness, a pay-back for his pride. We may surmise that an audience accustomed to illness being treated as both a physical and a spiritual ailment would have understood perfectly well the double meaning of Herod’s disease-ridden body. Mors then reiterates that he is targeting Herod’s pride with his death-stroke, and a devil receives him and his soldiers, a task that may be easier said than done. It is not hard to imagine the dramatic and even comedic possibilities offered by the devil character and his difficult task of removing the bodies from the playing area and into “my celle” (234).

The N-Town play takes the Christian moralization of Herod's disease and death to its ultimate conclusion. As in a morality play, God's messenger, Death, arrives to punish the sinner whose soul is relinquished to a demon from hell. Interestingly, the moralization of Herod's death actually lessens his particular wickedness, as he becomes a representation of mankind in general, especially all men who suffer from pride. While the devil takes Herod away, Mors addresses the audience, cautioning:

Off Kynge Herowde all men beware,  
Pat hath rejoycyd in pompe and pryde.  
For all his boste of blysse ful bare,  
He lyth now ded here on his syde.  
For whan I come I cannot spare;  
Fro me no whyht may hym hyde. (246–51)

Both the text and the notorious difficulty of removing a dead body from the stage indicate that Herod's body is still visible to the audience, perhaps being dragged off during this speech which covers the lengthy exit. In his speech, Mors focuses on worms consuming dead bodies: "Now is he as pore as I, / Wormys mete is his body" (255–56). Then, in reference to his own decaying body, he remarks about being "nakyd and pore of array / And wurmys knawe me al abowte" (272–73). The for third time, in the last lines of the play, he directly addresses the audience:

Evyn lyke to me, as I 3ow say,  
Shull all 3e be here in þis rowte,  
Whan I 3ow chalange at my day,  
I xal 3ow make ryght lowe to lowth  
And nakyd for to be.  
Amongys wormys, as I 3ow telle,  
Vndyr þe erth xul 3e dwelle,

And thei xul etyn both flesch and felle,  
As þei haue don me. (ll. 276–84)

In nine lines, Mors directs the attention of the audience repeatedly to their personal moral condition and implicitly to the need to repent.

Through the body and speech of Mors, Herod's body thus becomes an example for the human, post-lapsarian body, the bodies of those watching the play. The universalizing quality of Herod's judgment asks that all should think about their own judgment on what Mors refers to as "my day"—the Last Judgment. As David Bevington observes, "Just judgment awaits all men, and for that reason the dramatic images of judgment in medieval plays are always both particular and universal, historical and timeless, personal and generic."<sup>18</sup>

*Chester*. Like the N-Town play, the Slaughter of the Innocents pageant in the Chester Whitsun cycle features Herod's illness and death, but without placing as much emphasis on the corporeal. Unlike any of the other Herods, the Chester Herod acknowledges his spiritual failings and recognizes divine punishment when it arrives, inviting the audience to ponder the relationship between sin and punishment, a punishment both spiritual and physical. As Peter Travis observes, the Chester Slaughter pageant "succeeds in converting the potentially tragic threat of Herod into a comic demonstration of divine justice."<sup>19</sup> The character of Herod is placed firmly into the context of the judgment system that is highlighted throughout the cycle, as seen in the midwife episode, the Antichrist play, and the Last Judgment. Martin Stevens

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<sup>18</sup> David Bevington, "Introduction," *Homo, Memento Finis: The Iconography of Just Judgment in Medieval Art and Drama*, Early Drama, Art, and Music Monograph Ser. 6 (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1985), 2.

<sup>19</sup> Peter W. Travis, *Dramatic Design in the Chester Cycle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 138.

argues that, while all of the extant English “cycles” end with a Doomsday or Last Judgment play, only the Chester playwright incorporates that ending into its structure.<sup>20</sup> Throughout the Chester cycle, the dramatization of the just demise of God’s opponents clearly demonstrates the omnipotence of God, which scholars agree is a major theme of the cycle. The manner of Herod’s death serves as a warning to them, not just as an example of an evil tyrant’s punishment.

Unlike his counterparts in the Towneley or York plays, the Chester Herod’s liability resides not only in his role as the king who orders the slaughter, but also in his role as conceiver of it, even though he knows it is “agaynst the right” (10.23). When he commands his soldiers to enact the slaughter, he acknowledges the spiritual penalty awaiting him: “though wee therefore should goe to hell, / all the children of Israell / wee deeme them to be slayne” (122–24). He will recognize the emotional and physical effects of his punishment all too soon, for one of the children killed in the slaughter is his own infant son, derived from an apocryphal story found in the *Golden Legend* and the *Stanzaic Life of Christ*, the latter an acknowledged source for the Chester cycle. Upon hearing of his son’s death, Herod begins to blame the woman caring for the boy, but he quickly changes his tone and acknowledges that this is part of the divine vengeance he must suffer: “yt is vengeance, as drinke I wyne” (399). But this death is just the beginning.

Shortly thereafter, Herod is struck by an illness that instantly rots his legs and arms, and, recognizing his illness as additional punishment, he prepares to go to hell. His language in his death scene, rather than focusing on physical pain or decay, reflects his moral failings and

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<sup>20</sup> Martin Stevens, *Four Middle English Mystery Cycles: Textual, Contextual, and Critical Interpretations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 295–322.

terror. He sees “swames” of “feindes” issuing from the mouth of hell “after mee,” and then ultimately must “bequeath here in this place / my soule to be with Sathanas” (423–25, 430–31). The moment before his death is one of individual moral reflection and recognition of his sins. That the Chester Herod does not dwell on his physical torment but on his spiritual shortcomings is indicative of the cycle’s overall preference for the spiritual and didactic over the physical and affective.<sup>21</sup> Herod’s physical demise, although clearly portrayed, is nevertheless subordinate. No other dramatic Herod reveals his awareness of the system of divine justice in which his actions and demise must be situated. Divine omnipotence is shown to exact judgment on the sinner. The Chester Herod in this way functions as a moral mirror reflecting a negative exemplum for the audience, who share a membership in the same system of divine judgment.

By way of warning, after the Chester Herod dies, a demon enters “to fetch this lord you froe, / in woe ever to dwell” but implicitly warns that he will return for “all false beleevers” and to take them to the same place to be tortured (436–41). In this way he emphasizes not the physical deterioration of the body but the eternal torment of hell. As this devil takes Herod to the place of everlasting darkness, he speaks his final lines: “I will you bringe thus to woe, / and come agayne and fetch moe / as fast as I maye go” (454–56). The threat to the audience is clear. Thus, in both the N-Town and Chester plays, Herod’s damnation is explicitly held up as a mirror for the audience.

*Language.* Given the widespread tradition of Herod’s gruesome end and the fact that, as Sarah Beckwith observes, “it is in the nature of the theatrical medium to foreground the human

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<sup>21</sup> See Stevens, *Four Middle English Mystery Cycles*, passim; Travis, *Dramatic Design*, 136–38; Kathleen Ashley, “Divine Power in Chester Cycle and Late Medieval Thought,” *Journal of History of Ideas* 39 (1978): 387–404.

body,”<sup>22</sup> one might expect the medieval dramatists to have all chosen to use the physically punitive interpretation of Herod, but they do not. The Towneley, York, and Coventry dramatists differ by omitting Herod’s physical disease and instead focusing on Herod’s deterioration through changes in his speech. At times, his language hints at bodily corruption, but the pollution is primarily linguistic. The York plays depend on bombastic alliterative speeches to establish Herod’s character, but in the Slaughter of the Innocents pageant, he falls into despair and is ultimately dependent on the words of others, thus demonstrating his complete political, spiritual, and linguistic impotence. The increasingly inarticulate language of the Towneley Herod reveals his anger and frenzy even while he attempts to control the speech of everyone else. The Coventry Herod, long considered the most raging of all medieval Herods, actually turns out to be a wily manipulator of language, a politician who knows the power of suiting his speech to a specific situation. His rhetorical skill, however, disintegrates when the Magi escape and his soldiers question the Slaughter.

Herod’s loss of control over his language indicates his loss of reason, a loss that, as we have seen, in the patristic tradition indicates a loss of virtue.<sup>23</sup> The tradition of reading speech as a spiritual signifier is widely seen in later texts, such as sermons or preaching manuals, through

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<sup>22</sup> Sarah Beckwith, *Christ’s Body: Identity, Culture and Society in Late Medieval Writings* (London: Routledge, 1993), 61.

<sup>23</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus*, 2:5 (“On Laughter”), in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, rev. A Cleveland Coxe, 10 vols. (reprint, Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans, n.d.), 2:249–50; Bernard of Clairvaux, “On the Steps of Humility and Pride,” in *Selected Works*, trans. G. R. Evans (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 99–143; and Augustine, *City of God*, especially 14:19.

which the theological interpretation could be popularized.<sup>24</sup> An analysis of these yields an awareness of three particular forms of spiritually flawed speech: immoderate, uncontrolled, or excessive speech; irrational or unintelligible rantings; and deceitful language.<sup>25</sup> The dramatists who use Herod's language to reveal his corrupt spiritual state each choose different forms of sinful language, revealing varied interpretations of Herod's spiritual corruption. The York Herod's excessive language and ultimate despondency are symptoms of emotional excess; the Towneley Herod's growing incomprehensibility reveals a frenzy that is theologically linked to madness or demonic possession; and the Coventry Herod's manipulative dialogue reveals him to be a master of deceit and hypocrisy. Any power Herod wields in these plays is directly linked to his verbal ability, and both his power and language fail when confronted by the Word Incarnate, Jesus.

*York.* Despite the varied and layered composition of the York Corpus Christi plays, Alexandra F. Johnston, convincingly arguing that the cycle demonstrates a unified adherence to Augustinian theology and theory of language as a signifier of spiritual state,<sup>26</sup> observes how "right speaking" is exemplified by Christ, whose stillness, simplicity, and clarity represent the

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<sup>24</sup> See Siegfried Wenzel, ed. and trans., *Fasciculus Morum: A Fourteenth-Century Preacher's Handbook* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), 34–37 (*De Superbia*), 47–49 (*De Superbia oris*).

<sup>25</sup> See, e.g., Robert Mannyng, *Handlyng Synne* (1303), the French *Somme le Roi* (1279), the *Azeybite of Inwit* (1340), and the fourteenth-century *Lay Folk's Catechism* and *Book of Vices and Virtues*.

<sup>26</sup> Alexandra F. Johnston, "The Word Made Flesh: Augustinian Elements in the York Cycle," in *The Centre and Its Compass: Studies in Medieval Literature in Honor of Professor John Leyerle*, ed. Robert A. Taylor et al. (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1993), 225–46, and "'His langage is lorne': The Silent Centre of the York Cycle," *Early Theatre* 3 (2000): 185–95.



linguistic model for souls in a state of grace.<sup>27</sup> Conversely, when a character uses frenetic, excessive language and plosive alliteration, his language conveys to the audience his spiritual failing. Such language clearly notifies the audience of these characters' ultimate powerlessness, for the truly powerful, the holy, are consistently restrained in their language, even silent. The York Herod's excessive language places him in linguistic opposition to Christ, but it reveals more than his place in a parade of biblical villains. His linguistic and emotional excess works in conjunction with his growing dependence on the speech of his counselors, thereby revealing his lack of power over both his own emotions and his subjects.

In the York Corpus Christi cycle, Herod the Great appears in both the conflated Masons' and Goldsmiths' pageants with the Magi and in the Girdlers and Nailers' Slaughter of the Innocents pageant. In the first of these Herod is essentially a reactor, not an enactor. Although he begins the pageant by making threats directed at the audience members who represent his subjects, his confidence in making these erodes as the pageant progresses. Throughout the play, Herod's mental and emotional instability is marked by a series of mood changes, as he swings from a boastful tyrant to a desperate man who needs his subordinates to tell him what to do.

The key to the York Herod's characterization lies in his interactions with and reactions to his counselors, messenger, and soldiers. The counselors are flatterers who take over the political and military decision-making as Herod becomes doubtful, emotionally vulnerable, and incapable of making decisions. In contrast to the counselors, Nuncius directly challenges Herod in a flagrant display of insubordination. One can sense his rather exasperated tone in the following exchange:

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<sup>27</sup> Johnston, "The Word Made Flesh," 230–31.

HEROD           Why, whedir are þei gone?  
 NUNCIUS       Ilkone into ther owne lande.  
 HEROD           How sais þou, ladde? Late be.  
 NUNCIUS       I saie, for[th] they are past.  
 HEROD           What, forthe away fro me?  
 NUNCIUS       ȝa lord, in faitht, ful faste. . . . (19.97–102)

Roland Reed, who directed this pageant for the 1998 production of the York Cycle at the University of Toronto, refers to the Nuncius's attitude as "flip" and sees the him as "for the moment controlling the scene."<sup>28</sup> Herod is unable to control that insubordination or to regain the trust or loyalty of this servant who appears to be converted to belief in the new-born King. Although in the temporal world of Herod's kingdom the messenger would appear to be subverting the hierarchical social structure, within the spiritual context he is an agent of the Magi and of Christ. Therefore, his words have the power to deflate Herod's pomposity and send him into despondency.

When Herod finally comprehends the meaning of the Messenger's news, he falls into despair: "Allas, þan am I lorne" (114). He must rely on the counselors, who reprimand and threaten the Messenger: "Hense tyte but þou þe hye, / With doulle her schall þou dye, / That wreyes hym on this wise" (120–22). Only after Herod has heard this can he bluster and threaten the Messenger himself: "Thou lyes, false traytoure strange; / Loke neuere þou negh me nere. / Vppon liffe and lymme / May I þat faitour fange, / Full high I schall gar hym hange, / Both þe, harlott, and hym" (125–30). These words signal only a momentary rally, however, for as soon as the messenger leaves, Herod again despairs: "Al[a]s, for sorowe and sighte / My woo no

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<sup>28</sup> Roland Reed, "The Slaughter of the Innocents: Director's Notes," *Early Theatre* 3 (2000), 223.

wighte may wryte; / What deuell is best to do?" (136–38). His despondency leads directly to the counselors suggesting the slaughter. Although they suggest the Slaughter in a number of the plays, especially in liturgical drama, in the Coventry, N-Town, and Chester plays, Herod conceives the plan. When he does not—when the counselors must conceive the violent atrocity—the choice portrays Herod's weakness as a political ruler, however evil such an action will be.

Herod, who is completely incapable of making a decision himself, lacks power as emphasized when the soldiers are given their directions for the killing of the children not by Herod but by his counselor. The king is robbed of even the linguistic power to command—a loss of power that is unique in the English plays, thus making the York Herod the most politically impotent version of the character. The counselor's intervention continues even after the Slaughter when the soldiers return to report their success. Although the first soldier directly salutes Herod (242–43), the counselor must advise him before he can respond to him, and only then is the king able to hope that "pei haue gone right" (247), referring to possible success of the plan to assassinate the Christ Child. Unfortunately for the plan and for his mood, the soldier's report does nothing to put Herod's worries to rest, and he fretfully realizes that the massacre in no way guarantees that the infant Jesus is among the dead.

The York cycle provides one of the few times we see this fearful and uncertain response to the Slaughter. The closest another English play comes to it is in the Coventry play, when Herod is told that the massacre has missed its target. That news, however, prompts an active response from the Coventry Herod, who plans to ride off to Egypt and hunt Jesus down. In the York play, we are left with a Herod who is scared and even more unsure and undecided than he has been up to this point. This final image of the York Herod should not surprise us, though,

since he has been prone to despair and emotional breakdown from the start. When his reason cannot rule his passions, he suffers from mood changes and becomes completely dependent on his subordinates, revealing both his spiritual and political weakness. Because he is incapable of initiating a plan to defeat Christ himself, he is actually a puppet of his counselors rather than an effective antagonist for the newborn King.

*Towneley*. Like the speech of the York Herod, the linguistic problems of the Towneley Herod ultimately arise from emotional excess. While the despondent mood of the York Herod is a symptom of spiritual deprivation, the increasing incomprehensibility of the Towneley Herod reveals a frenzy or madness which is linked to demonic possession. Oswei Temkin explains that, as early as Tertullian (160–220 C.E.), a loss of reason and descent into insanity were considered symptoms of demonic influence: “the breath of the demons . . . corrupted the mind, leading to rages and disgraceful insanities, or savage passions combined with various errors.”<sup>29</sup> The Towneley Herod never gives up trying to control speech: his own, his subjects’, the Magi’s, his counselors’, and his soldiers’. When he cannot manage to exercise such control, his anger and self-doubt lead to a frenzy which affects his mind and his ability to communicate. The language of the title character of the Towneley *Magnus Herodes* is irrational in the extreme, loaded with expletives and the incoherence of a madman. The linguistic individualization in *Magnus Herodes* not only defines character, but also provides implicit directions to the actor about line-delivery and the histrionics that might accompany the lines.

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<sup>29</sup> Oswei Temkin, *Hippocrates in a World of Pagans and Christians* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 119, quoting Tertullian’s *Apology*, 22:6; see Tertullian, *Apology and De Spectaculis*, ed. and trans. T. R. Glover (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1931), 119.

The Towneley play is in fact very much about Herod's unsuccessful attempt to control words. At both the beginning and the end of the play he worries about and tries to reinforce his own reputation to suppress the muttering of his subjects about a new, rival king. The Messenger warns the audience that they must not *speak* about the infant: "Carpys of no kyng / Bot Herode, that lordyng, / Or busk to youre beylding, / Youre heedys for to hyde" (16.49–52). After presenting the inflated list of lands over which Herod supposedly reigns, the Messenger says, "His renowne / Can no tong tell" (74–75). Herod's concerns are the central themes of the play: reputation, rumor, and the silencing of speech that does not conform to the party line. That he focuses on these issues demonstrates his insecurity and fear, qualities that ultimately lead to his madness. Because medieval understanding of madness is that it is also both a sign of and a punishment for sin, his fears reveal his moral failings and his vulnerable hold on the crown.

The Messenger informs Herod that he has been unsuccessful in stopping the people from spreading rumors and chattering about the new king. Herod's goal is to censor that talking, and his first lines announce that purpose and his objective to hang all transgressors. The rhetoric of silencing continues with lines such as "Peasse, both yong and old, / At my bydyng, I red" and "Speke not or I haue told / What I will in this stede" (131–32 and 137–38). Herod then turns to the theme of his reputation: "My name spryngys far and nere: / The doughtyest, men me call, / That euer ran with spere, / A lord and kyng ryall" (157–60). The "men me call" tag is not simply a convenient phrase to rhyme with "kyng ryall"; rather, it reinforces Herod's concern with what other people are saying—that is, with his fame.

Herod's speech soon begins to reveal his anger that the Magi have deceived him. By the middle of the speech, his loss of temper and the physical effects of it are clear, especially at lines 170–71: "What dewill! me thynk I brast / For anger and for teyn." The physical and

psychological stress from his anger emerges when he speaks with his soldiers, who he thinks have allowed the Magi to escape: “We! outt! for teyn I brast! / We! fy! / Fy on the dewill! Where may I byde, / Bot fyght for teyn and al to-chyde?” (216–19). Rather than telling us his psychological state, the incoherence of his language reveals it. The repetition of “we” and “fy” are indicative of noise rather than words, noise that allows the actor to huff and puff in anger without being able to express specific thoughts. Such uncontrolled vocal emissions are, according to Bernard of Clairvaux, symptoms of the irrational state of a proud man, who “is like a blown-up bladder which has been punctured and squeezed. As it goes down it squeaks, and the air does not come out everywhere but whistles through the little hole in a series of shrieks.”<sup>30</sup> The playwright repeatedly uses inarticulate noises to reveal the particular irrationality of this Herod. As these speeches dictate his behavior, we also begin to see the playwright’s skill in providing implicit acting instructions within his dialogue.

The link between Herod’s physical and linguistic states corresponds with medieval medical descriptions of the manifestations of madness. According to Bartholomeus Anglicus’s twelfth-century medical text, frenzy is accompanied by the following symptoms: “woodness and continual waking, moving and casting about the eyes, raging, stretching, and casting out of hands, moving and wagging of the head, grinding and gnashing together of the teeth.”<sup>31</sup> The “Wakefield Master” dramatist has indeed directed the actor playing Herod to display such body language as he berates the soldiers. As the second soldier responds, “What nede you be abast? /

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<sup>30</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, “On Humility and Pride,” 132 (12:40).

<sup>31</sup> Bartholomeus, *De proprietatibus rerum*, bk. 7, as quoted by Logan Clendening, ed., *Source Book of Medical History* (New York: Dover Publications, 1960), 87.

Ther ar no greatt myschefys / For these maters to gnast” (226–28), ‘gnast’ being glossed by Cawley as to “gnash the teeth (with rage).”<sup>32</sup> The loss of linguistic control revealed by the expletives “we” and “fy” is mirrored in Herod’s loss of physical control as he thrashes about the stage, gnashing his teeth. The dramatist is using both physical and verbal methods to communicate to the actor and the audience that this Herod is more than a ranting tyrant; he has become a madman.

Twenty lines after his teeth-gnashing, Herod again bursts into incoherence when he caps his threats against the Magi with the following explosion: “If ye byde in these wonys, / I shall dyng you with stonys— / Yei, ditizance doutance!” (245–47). This is, as Stevens and Cawley note, one of Herod’s “scraps of French,” actually “a corruption of ‘dites sans doutance’” (“I say without doubt”).<sup>33</sup> In performance, however, the meaning of the line is scarcely important, as it calls for Herod to explode into a burst of exhortation.<sup>34</sup> Thereafter, Herod’s physical state again mirrors his verbal state: he does not know what to do with his body: “I wote not where I may sytt / For anger and for teyn” (248–49). His anger has rendered him ineffective and confused, both vocally and physically, the embodiment of a soul out of tune with the harmony that comes from obedience to God.

Nevertheless, Herod continues to attempt to control the language of others, including the language of texts. Having dismissed his soldiers, so he can have a private conversation with his

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<sup>32</sup> A. C. Cawley, ed., *The Wakefield Pageants in the Towneley Cycle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1958), 150.

<sup>33</sup> Stevens and Cawley, eds., *The Towneley Plays*, 2:525.

<sup>34</sup> Conclusion is based on my experience directing the play with an actor who “ranted” very little. This line, however, seems to deny any possible delivery other than an explosion.

counselors, he loses control again when they confirm the prophecies of Christ's birth: "Fy, dottypols, with youre bookys— / Go kast thaym in the brookys! / With sich wylys and crokys / My wytt away rafys" (335–38). This is a verbal attack on the counselors, but implies a corresponding physical threat as well. Herod might knock the books containing the prophecies out of the counselors' hands at "Fy," or "Go kast thaym in the brookys," but the physical menace of such action is deflated by the retreat that must accompany the defeated tone of "my wytt away rafys" (328).

Herod in his anger now reduces him to puffing and panting: "War! I say, let me pant" (345). As his temper overwhelms him, he steps closer to the frenzied peak of his ire and sinfulness. The Slaughter is the counselors' attempt to subdue Herod's language just as it is his attempt to destroy both the source of the chattering and the Word Incarnate itself—that is, Jesus as Logos. The massacre, however, fails utterly in these respects. The grieving mothers' cries thwart Herod's hopes of silencing opposition, the Holy Family's escape to Egypt prevents the destruction of the Word, and Herod collapses into the absurd final line "I can no more Franch" (741). The *Magnus Herodes* playwright develops in his Herod the qualities of anger, fear, and self-doubt, all of which feed his irrationality until it has developed into madness. Because such frenzy has a traditional link to demonic possession, and because madness was interpreted as both a sign of and a punishment for sin, the title character of the *Magnus Herodes* is a villain of greater guilt than the York Herod.

*Coventry*. As we have seen, the Herod of the Coventry Shearmen and Tailors' pageant may have exerted the most influence on the stereotype of the ranting tyrant. It is virtually impossible to find any discussion of Herod's character without encountering a reference to Hamlet's comment to the players (act 3, scene 2) about out-Heroding Herod, which seems to



have solidified the reputation of the character for all following generations. If Shakespeare had seen a Herod ranting on the stage, it may well have been at Coventry, only a short distance from Stratford-upon-Avon, since this Corpus Christi cycle was not suppressed until 1579 when the playwright was fifteen.<sup>35</sup> However, Coventry stage directions and ranting speeches are hardly representative of the far more complex characterization of this Herod, let alone of all medieval dramatic Herods.

Although he does *become* a ranting tyrant, he does not begin the play as one. For much of his time on stage, he is actually a savvy politician, a manipulator of language. He switches tone depending on whom he is addressing, gives orders to his messenger on how to mislead through language, and reveals through direct address that he is using language consciously to mislead the Magi. Such deceptive, ill-intentioned speech is different from that spoken by the York and Towneley Herods and signifies that the Coventry Herod is more guilty than his counterparts. His manipulative language, to be sure, eventually fails when he loses his temper and begins to rage. He then loses his considerable rhetorical skill, his power, and his effectiveness as a leader.

In this play, sharp contrasts in language are used to reveal character. Before Herod enters, the language of the messenger's speech clearly shifts the tone from the serenity of the preceding prophets scene to the comedy and linguistic self-consciousness of the court. Nuncios' speech is in Anglo-Norman French, but actually says very little, merely demanding quiet and heaping complementary titles upon the audience. Then Herod begins his own boastful speech

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<sup>35</sup> King and Davidson, eds., *The Coventry Corpus Christi Plays*, 236.

with “*Qui stat in Jude et Rex Iseraell*” (436), misquoting the offertory verse “*Qui stat in domo domini*” (436).<sup>36</sup> Attention is already called to Herod’s linguistic abuse and folly.

Thereupon, Herod claims, both absurdly and blasphemously, to have created heaven and hell and to control the whole world, including the weather, which, he insists, responds to his countenance. His speech displays polysyllabic vocabulary, alliteration, long lines, and extended, complex sentences, as, for example, in the following asserting his power: “And those tyraneos trayturs be force ma I commpell / Myne ennmyis to vanquese and evyn to dust them dryve, / And with a twynke of myn iee not won to be lafte alyve” (454–56). While such long, irregular lines and alliteration resemble the typical language of a boasting tyrant, this is only one of the poetic voices of the Coventry Herod. Later, he is perfectly capable of speaking clearly and succinctly as his persona and his audience change.

After commanding the arrest and execution of anyone who protests his new “truage” (customs tax), Herod retires, and the entry of the Magi introduces speech that is simple and clear: “Now blessid be God of his swet sonde, / For yondur a feyre bryght star I do see. / Now ys he common vs amonge / Asse the profettis seyde thatt yt schuld be” (490–93). Such straightforward language signifies persons who are not using speech to hide anything, in contrast to Herod’s response when he hears of their presence from his messenger. Herod is immediately politic and wily, telling Nuncios to use mild words and deception to bring the Magi to his court: “I warne the that thy wordis be mylde, / For there mast thou hede and crafte we[lde]” in order that “those iij kyngis shal be begild” (565–67). In such advice to adopt

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<sup>36</sup> For identification of the liturgical source, see Richard Rastall, *The Heaven Singing*, Music in Early English Religious Drama 1 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer 1996), 202.

deceitful speech he is therefore guilty of speaking a form of *maliloquio: mala consuluntur et prestantur* (“evil counsel and help”).<sup>37</sup> Yet here he has avoided the bombastic language he had previously used, and instead his directions are worded simply and clearly, revealing his ability to suit his language to the objective, just as he instructs Nuncios to do.

When the Magi appear before Herod, he addresses them in an appropriately courtly manner, free of the aureate vocabulary of his opening speech, with simple syntax and vocabulary that deceptively approximates the Magi’s own speaking style. The appellation “sy kyngis” and the phrases “ase I vnderstand” and “I pray you hartely” all indicate that Herod’s tone is smooth and courteous. The boastful persona is hidden under the politic veneer of gracious sovereign addressing foreign dignitaries.

No sooner is Herod’s final polite “adev” to the departing Magi spoken than his tone changes to reveal his inner thoughts. The “ij kyngis,” having set forth to find the Christ Child, have promised to return to court again thereafter, but when they do Herod will see that “these vyle wreychis to deyth þe schal be broght” (621–28). As the tone has shifted to reveal Herod’s scheme, the lines of his speech become longer and more complex. His language returns to the rhythms of his opening speech, and his persona reverts from false smiling host to openly aggressive, murderous heathen tyrant.<sup>38</sup> The villain has invited us into his machinations and reveals (and revels in) his hypocrisy. Any character who can maneuver a personal encounter this way is fully cognizant of the ways that language can both mask and reveal one’s true intentions.

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<sup>37</sup> Wenzel, ed. and trans., *Fasciculus*, 48 (*De Superbia Oris*).

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, 1.1.106–20, in which Richard’s sympathetic words to the arrested Clarence are immediately followed by his revelation to the audience that he will “shortly” dispatch his brother.

The messenger's news that the Magi have departed the country by "Anothur wey" (722) sends Herod into the raging fit so commonly cited as evidence of his character: "I stampe! I stare! I loke all abowtt!" and "I rent, I rawe, and now run I wode! / A, thatt these velen trayturs hath mard þis my mode!" Then, finally, he threatens the missing Magi: "The schal be hangid yf I ma cum them to!" (724, 726–28). The stage direction follows: "*Here Erode ragis in þe pagond and in the strete also.*" His descent into madness is new, for nothing earlier in the play indicated that he was a raving tyrant, just a pompous and manipulative one. In contrast to the Towneley Herod who transitions from boastful to doubtful and anxious, and finally into a frenzied madness, the Coventry Herod's emotional and psychological change is more abrupt and clear-cut. Here he quickly becomes a comical ranting tyrant who loses his ability to persuade and manipulate.

The immediate loss of his rhetorical power is revealed when he fails to convince his soldiers that the correct course of action is to massacre all the young children in his kingdom. Having dreamed up the Slaughter himself, he consults the soldiers: "How sey you, sir kyghtis, ys not this the best red / That all yong chyldur for this schuld be dede, / Wyth sworde to be slayne?" (731–33). The soldiers, however, feel free to criticize Herod's strategy, not only because it will bring shame to them personally, but also because the proposed scheme is politically dangerous. The second soldier warns Herod that a massacre might cause a rebellion: "Soo grett a morder to see of yong frute / Wyll make a rysyng in þi noone cuntrey" (744–45). If he has been able to listen to reasonable argument previously, his wild reaction to the soldiers' attempt at counsel reveals that he is not the same man: "A rysyng! owt! owt! owt!" (746), followed by the stage direction "*There Erode ragis ageyne*" and a threat demanding obedience to his will or "apon a gallowse bothe you shall dy" (749).

This fit silences the soldiers' attempts to dissuade Herod from the Slaughter, but they remain reluctant and unconvinced of its necessity or rectitude. He must sense that he has lost the loyalty of the soldiers, as his final instruction to them is to bring all the dead bodies back so he can see them. Because he has lost his considerable powers of persuasion, he can no longer trust the soldiers to carry out his orders with zeal and must institute measures to check on their reluctance to carry out this criminal act. The Coventry play thus places ownership of the Slaughter squarely on Herod rather than allowing him to share the onus with his counselors and soldiers. This responsibility is given visual weight when the soldiers obey Herod's command to bring the slaughtered babies back to him on a wagon. This is the only English play in which Herod is brought face to face with the bloodshed he has caused, and the visual impact of the scene reiterates his complete culpability. Just at the moment where the audience must contemplate the awesome power and guilt of the earthly ruler, however, they are reminded of his ultimate ineffectiveness. As Herod is inspecting the wagon of dead babies, Nuncios announces "Eyrode kyng, I schall the tell, / All thy dedis ys cum to noght. / This chyld ys gone into Eygipte to dwell" (834–36). While the York Slaughter pageant ends with Herod fearing that the intended victim has escaped, the Coventry Herod receives confirmation of that fact.

The dramatic figures of Herod in the extant British plays are emotionally, morally, and linguistically varied, demonstrating that the playwrights made choices based on their source materials and their particular interests or agendas. The plays that dramatize Herod's death vary in their attention to judgment, didacticism, audience reflection, corporeal revelation, and divine omnipotence. The N-Town Death of Herod shares with other plays in the N-Town Nativity sequence an interest in the physical manifestation of spiritual truths. The Chester Herod's awareness of his own judgment is part of the cycle's larger interest in divine judgment and

mercy. While the emphasis on Herod's body serves to connect him to the audience, the plays that focus on his language individualize him and his guilt. The York Herod's language is ill-governed and excessive, and he suffers from an inability to take charge. The Towneley Herod loses all power of reason in the tradition of a madman possessed by demons. The language of both the York and Towneley Herods, however, reveals them to be less guilty than the Coventry Herod, who uses *maliloquio*, speech which intends to harm others. For much of this play, he succeeds in manipulating and deceiving others with his rhetorical skills. Ultimately, his rage overcomes his powers of reason, and he loses his rhetorical ability and the loyalty of his followers.

The medieval character of Herod the Great has most frequently been described as a ranting tyrant, but that quality is only a portion of his role. Even in the episodes where he most closely resembles Hamlet's allusion to a raging "Termagant" such as the end of the Coventry Shearmen and Tailors' Play or the *Magnus Herodes*, the role is more varied in its demands than has been assumed. The complexity of the different characterizations is evident when close attention is paid to both the language of the plays and the inferred physical direction embedded within the dialogue. From such critical attentiveness we gain a new appreciation for the finesse these early dramatists and performers employed, and so too when we continue the process of studying medieval drama as live performance.

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